**Section B**

**Shakespeare**

**Romeo and Juliet**

Choose **ONE** question. [40 Marks]

You are advised to spend about 45 minutes on this section.

**Explore how Mercutio’s attitude towards Tybalt and others influences events in the play. Refer to this extract from Act 3 Scene 1 and elsewhere in the play.**

BENVOLIO By my head, here come the Capulets.

MERCUTIO By my heel, I care not.

Enter TYBALT and others

TYBALT Follow me close, for I will speak to them.

Gentlemen, good den: a word with one of you.

MERCUTIO And but one word with one of us? Couple it with something; make it a word and a

 blow.

TYBALT You shall find me apt enough to that, sir, an you will give me occasion.

MERCUTIO Could you not take some occasion without giving?

TYBALT Mercutio, thou consort'st with Romeo,--

MERCUTIO Consort! What, dost thou make us minstrels? An thou make minstrels of us, look to

hear nothing but discords: here's my fiddlestick; here's that shall make you dance.

'Zounds, consort!

BENVOLIO We talk here in the public haunt of men:

Either withdraw unto some private place,

And reason coldly of your grievances,

Or else depart; here all eyes gaze on us.

MERCUTIO Men's eyes were made to look, and let them gaze;

I will not budge for no man's pleasure, I.

Enter ROMEO

TYBALT Well, peace be with you, sir: here comes my man.

MERCUTIO But I'll be hanged, sir, if he wear your livery:

Marry, go before to field, he'll be your follower;

Your worship in that sense may call him 'man.'

Model Essay

Mercutio’s attitude towards other characters, and Tybalt in particular, has an essential dramatic function in influencing events in this tragedy. Structurally, this extract is from a scene which Shakespeare places after Romeo and Juliet’s secret marriage and includes the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt, which results in Romeo’s banishment – leading to the deaths of Juliet and himself. As so often in the play, Shakespeare is using contrasts, following up a romantic love scene with an aggressive, violent scene. It is a direct result of Mercutio’s attitude to other characters that these later brutal events occur.

Elsewhere in the play, Shakespeare has already shown Mercutio, as his name symbolically suggests, to be a quick-witted, light-hearted lover of fun in his banter with Romeo and Benvolio before the Capulets’ feast; there he mocks Romeo for his ominous dream in his famously fanciful flight of the imagination, the ‘Queen Mab’ speech. He has also previously shown this predilection for poking fun at other characters, with his salacious innuendo that the Nurse is a ‘bawd’ when she is acting as a go-between for Juliet and Romeo. Throughout the play, his comically ironic take on life is often at odds with the serious events unfolding around him – another example of Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of opposing concepts in this play.

The majority of this extract is written in prose, with Shakespeare signalling a comical scene; however, Mercutio’s humour definitely has a confrontational dark side. Shakespeare begins with Mercutio giving a clever, witty response, joking with the word ‘head’, to Benvolio’s warning about the approach of the Capulets, ‘By my heel I care not’. This foreshadows danger and creates a great deal of tension in the audience, who are all too aware of Tybalt’s desire for revenge and his skill as a swordsman.

Contextually, Shakespeare very clearly shows in this scene the machismo culture of the times, with armed young men full of bravado and with an exaggerated sense of honour, and often a melodramatic response to real or imagined disrespect, trying to outdo each other in public to gain reputation.

Shakespeare increases the tension throughout the exchange with Tybalt as Mercutio twists many of Tybalt’s innocent words into aggressive puns, which can only serve to aggravate him and provoke a violent response. Tybalt’s ‘word’ he insists should be ‘couple(d)… with a blow’. Also, when Tybalt states that Mercutio ‘consortest with Romeo’, Mercutio deliberately makes a mocking pun, twisting the meaning from ‘socialise’ to ‘make music with’ taunting Tybalt with his verbal skill. He implies that he is never going to be amicable towards Tybalt, there will never be harmonious music only ‘discords’.

The violent tone of the scene is further heightened by Shakespeare as Mercutio appears to challenge Tybalt to a swordfight, cleverly making his weapon into a metaphorical ‘fiddlestick’ to make him ‘dance’, which the audience infers to mean fight. Not only is Mercutio quick-witted, he is also quick-tempered; his strong, blasphemous exclamation of ‘Zounds’ at the end of his tirade shows that he is losing control of his emotions.

Shakespeare then switches to verse for the calmly rational intervention of Benvolio, the aptly named peacemaker. The use of blank verse signals greater control over language and should be the end of the bitter banter. In typical fashion, however, Mercutio’s response is to ignore the feelings and warnings of other characters and follow his own precarious path. Though Tybalt uncharacteristically uses the word ‘peace’, Mercutio will not back down and continues to taunt him by his cleverly deliberate misinterpretation of his use of the ‘man’ as ‘servant’. Thus, the extract ends on a very tense note.

There is not much ‘elsewhere in the play’ left for Mercutio, but his continued antagonism towards Tybalt becomes vitally important in influencing events. He is disgusted with Romeo’s refusal to fight Tybalt, enthusiastically takes up the challenge himself and is mortally wounded. It is significant that in his dying words he curses the Montagues and Capulets, whose feud he blames for his demise. His words ‘A plague on both your houses’ have Biblical connotations of the plagues of Egypt, where the first born child of every house died. This is horrifically ironic as the first born of the Montagues and Capulets are Romeo and Juliet – who will both die and finally bring peace to Verona.